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It's only rock 'n' roll, and it's only life

CHRIS BURNS has been a musician and a music fan for decades, but the Montreal guitarist doesn't take his passion too seriously

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
MUSIC

The adventurous streak that was sparked by Chris Burns's youthful discovery of punk continues to define his music.

VINCENZO D'ALTO/THE GAZETTE

Whenever I receive a promotional email from Montreal guitarist Chris Burns, I smile. Burns has played under the radar in countless bands in lofts, dives and festivals for over 30 years, and still finds the rock 'n' roll life — garage-punk to avant-garde — worth joking about.

For example: "Right off the bat, I would like to remind you all that you should not hesitate to reply to this email telling me to bugger off if you no longer wish to receive these missives."

Before launching into one promo, he mentioned his fridge and stove were for sale. "Both have been working fine the whole year I used them, but I honestly don't know how old they are." Finally, the gig, "at a wonderful loft space that is smoker (all kinds) friendly but large and airy enough so as not to smother the non-smokers."

And he signalled his 25th anniversary in alt-showbiz with "an overly ambitious soirée" to commemorate a "non-momentous occasion."

On Thursday, Burns will play at the Festival international de musique actuelle de Victoriaville as a member of the Ratchet Orchestra, an up-to-30-member outfit that bursts at the seams with experimental sounds, playing a tribute to Sun Ra with the latter's saxophonist Marshall Allen joining in.

Burns — whose email moniker is "crispyburns" (we'll get to the fire later) — was the youngest of seven kids growing up next to Dorval airport. "I mean, really next to it — the planes rattling the windows, trains going clickety-clack, the highway whoosh, not to mention the various sounds made by my brothers and sisters. That's why I like noises: I used to fall asleep to them."

His musical epiphany occurred before he entered teenhood, listening to his sister's copy of Patti Smith's Horses album. "It was the perfect age, just discovering punk — lots of energy, pissed off at everything, lots of swear words, and also humour and a kind of cartoony element I could relate to. I could make my way. Chops weren't all that important; it was more about expressing yourself. Your lack of skill could actually be an asset. I still keep that attitude of trying to play beyond my technical means, not being afraid of going off into unknown spaces."

At age 15, he scraped up the nerve to ask musicians 10 to 12 years his senior to join their band. "I had to borrow someone else's guitar. I didn't really appreciate how nice it was to give this kid a chance." He eventually bought a Fender Stratocaster ("the one I have now") and quit a Concordia creative writing class for music.

"Playing with older people, they turned me on with tapes of the Velvet Underground, the Stooges. Now I go back to the '60s and find a lot of that music was more rebellious than what was called punk in the '70s. I was one of maybe two or three people who liked punk in my suburban West Island high school, and you could get beat up just for liking it or even wearing a Ramones button.

"I was in a lot of one-offs, sitting in. My third band, Slaphappy Five, lasted a good 10 years — late '80s through the '90s. Most of the bands came and went. Then I started improvising with Sam Shalabi. He forced me to think about improv in a more abstract way, not just jamming off three chords. I met (drummer) John Heward, now in his 70s. It was baptism by fire with these master improvisers. It used to be rock 'n' roll could encompass a lot of things; now people think it's Nickelback. If I don't have a rock 'n' roll band to play with once a week, it makes me kind of crazy."

> *"Playing music has always got me through any hard times. It's always been cathartic, whether I need it or not."*
> CHRIS BURNS

Mile End, the hype goes, contains more musicians per capita than anywhere else in Canada. Burns would disapprove if you called him a kingpin or mover and shaker in this scene. ("Besides, I play all over Montreal," including a regular DJ gig at Cheval Blanc on Ontario St. E.) Let's just say he embodies the true spirit of music.

"There used to be a real divide between anglophone and francophone bands and their fans. I never really understood that. I mean, for rock 'n' roll, you can't make out the words anyway. I'm always playing with mixed bands and usually the rehearsals are run in franglais.

"When you get three bands on the bill, you meet people with common interests and the bands socialize. A show I organized recently at the Casa del Popolo, I played with a wonky R&B/garage band, but the opening act was almost like performance art — three women in makeup, playing electric drums and zithers and singing conceptual songs — and it was a fun, trippy thing, and the last band was a straight-up garage poppy rock band. Everyone brought in friends, family and fans, and everybody liked everybody else's show. To me, that's music — you don't have to compartmentalize it."

In 2006, there was an explosion at Burns's Parc Ave. apartment building. "The building lifted a good four inches off its foundation. The fact it didn't crumble on us was unbelievable. It felt like a truck rammed into the building, and when flames started engulfing it, I realized this was more serious than I thought. I hadn't grabbed anything — not even my wallet with my ID. I had a lot of vinyl, master tapes of recordings I'd done, cassettes of shows, a lot of writing, photographs — your life, stuff that you care about. Luckily, my guitar and amp were at my rehearsal space.

"I realized that with everything gone, playing music was so great. It causes you to re-evaluate what's important. A fireman gave me a bag with some clothes in it, and I dumped it at my girlfriend's place and joked, 'Well, that's the easiest move I've ever made.'"

People organized a benefit concert at La Sala Rossa. "The building was full of immigrants who didn't have anybody to lean on, so I was able to distribute some of the money to them. I did a solo set and just described what happened, which I was sick of doing, so I could get it done in one shot.

"Playing music has always got me through any hard times. It's always been cathartic, whether I need it or not."

Chris Burns plays with the Ratchet Orchestra in a tribute to Sun Ra, Thursday at 10 p.m. at the Festival international de musique actuelle de Victoriaville. Tickets cost $36. Call 819-752-7912 or visit fimav.qc.ca.

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Leftover food is a wasted opportunity to save money

Trashed products cost us $384 per person annually

MARC & CRAIG KIELBURGER
LIVING ME TO WE

Every year in Canada, $27 billion worth of food is wasted, according to the Value Chain Management Center.

PEC LES FILMS

We're seriously considering opening a biological research station in Craig's kitchen, where new forms of life may be evolving in his fridge. When you travel as much as we do — often taking off on just a few hours' notice — meal planning is difficult. Too often, our produce sits untouched until it resembles primordial ooze. It's a guilt trip every time we dump a Tupperware-container-turned-bacterial-habitat into the trash.

Our grandparents lived through the Second World War, with its food shortages and rationing, and were raised to savour every last morsel on their plates. They handed that food thriftiness down to their kids, our parents' generation, who took up the refrain: "Eat, there are starving people in —," which was usually Africa in the era of Pierre Trudeau and Ronald Reagan. But as the decades have passed with no serious threat to our food supply, our attitudes to food waste have relaxed. Your milk expires tomorrow? Better not risk it. That green pepper looks a little wrinkly? Chuck it.

Every year in Canada, $27 billion worth of food is wasted — 40 per cent of the food we produce. That's according to a 2010 study by the Value Chain Management Center (VCMC). We burn more money on wasted food than the gross domestic product of the world's 32 poorest countries combined.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that nearly half of all the food produced in the world ends up uneaten.

So where does it go?

Ever wondered why bunches of carrots are almost all exactly the same length? Us neither, but we recently found out. As much as 30 per cent of the fruits and vegetables grown in Canada will never make it to store shelves because they are deemed too ugly to eat.

But the biggest losses by far happen in our own homes. All of the mould colonies in Canadian fridges add up to $13.4 billion in wasted food every year. That's $384 per person — straight from your wallet to the trash. And our wasteful ways are on the rise. The VCMC says the annual amount of wasted vegetables in Canada was almost 80 kg per person in 2009, up from 50 kg per person in 1961. The average body weight of an adult male Canadian is 80 kg (or 730 green peppers, give or take).

But here's the real kicker: uneaten food also squanders all the elements that went into producing that food — water, electricity, transportation fuel. We pat ourselves on the back for installing low-flow toilets. Meanwhile, the International Water Management Institute in Stockholm estimates that almost half the water used to grow food every year is flushed down the toilet (metaphorically speaking), by hydrating produce that will never be eaten.

Eating leftovers could strike a major blow against climate change. According to the David Suzuki Foundation, 20 per cent of Canada's methane emissions — a greenhouse gas that traps more heat than carbon dioxide — come from the organic waste rotting in our landfills. Cutting that would be equivalent to pulling one third of Canada's cars off the road.

But even before the leftovers pile up, consider that most people generally buy more food than they can use. Two-for-the-price-of-one strawberries might sound like a great deal, but not if you can't eat them all before they go mouldy. Experts like those at the VCMC say consumers need to re-evaluate their shopping habits. Stores need to change the way they market, and stop using sales and incentives to coax consumers into buying more food than they need. They also argue that food producers and retailers could use labelling to teach consumers better food storage practices so foods last longer.

After all, we work hard to earn the money to buy our food. And while the local raccoons might appreciate your leftover lasagna in the trash bin, your family will appreciate it even more on their plates. Now if you'll excuse us, we have to go catch a month-old pizza that's making a break for the door.

Brothers Craig and Marc Kielburger founded the educational partner and international charity Free The Children and the youth empowerment movement We Day.

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